# THE CALENDAR OF MODERN LETTERS

March 1925 — July 1927

Edited by

Edgell Rickword and Douglas Garman

*New Impression with a Review in Retrospect by*

*Malcolm Bradbury*

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# A REVIEW IN RETROSPECT

by

MALCOLM BRADBURY

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# A REVIEW IN RETROSPECT*

THE three great literary reviews of the 1920s were *The Criterion*, *The Adelphi* and *The Calendar of Modern Letters*. Of these, the last-mentioned was in many ways much the best, yet it is certainly the least remembered. In 1933 Dr F. R. Leavis edited a selection from its pages, entitled *Towards Standards of Criticism*; he remarked, in his introduction, that the review had commanded the services of 'half a dozen really distinguished critics, each one better than any that finds frequent employment in existing periodicals' and he compared the review with *The Criterion*, remarking on its superior liveliness and its greater critical excellence. Moreover, there was in the founding, in 1932, of *Scrutiny* a strong and conscious debt to *The Calendar*, and perhaps it was the sense of the gap left by the demise of the paper that stirred *Scrutiny* into life. When *The Calendar* died there was left no periodical concerned for the moral and cultural enrichment of literature and none devoted to the exposition of serious critical principles. *The Criterion*, while the most serious and intelligent of contemporary journals, did not seem to the editors of *Scrutiny* to be performing the service required of a literary periodical at this time, and indeed that review never consolidated the distinguished statements on critical matters which Eliot had contributed to its pages early in its career. Thus *The Calendar*, which appeared between March 1925 and July 1927, was able to spread its influence much more widely than its present lack of reputation would suggest. It had much to do with the growth of the modern movement in criticism.

On the whole, the significant activity in the little magazines of the previous decade had been that of accomplishing a literary revolution. The tone of the important journals was *avant garde;* their circulation was small; they were addressed largely to a bohemian-intellectual reading public. Such criticism as appeared in these magazines tended to be written by literary practitioners, like Pound and Eliot, Ford Madox Hueffer and F. S. Flint, and was very much devoted to what Pound called Making It New.

* This essay first appeared in *The London Magazine*, October, 1961.

It was reformatory rather than considered; but it offered many critical insights that subsequent critics sought to pursue with greater precision. The twenties were a period of *critical* revolution. Indeed, it is, perhaps, the development of criticism that forms the most *visible* advance that has been made in the pages of the twentieth-century literary periodical. By the beginning of the century the play of criticism as a serious discipline that had prevailed in the reviews and magazines of the early nineteenth century had almost disappeared. 'Time is ripe for the forging of a weapon of criticism, and for the emphatic assertion of literary standards,' declared Harold Monro in the first number of *The Poetry Review* in January 1912, and elsewhere in the same issue of the same periodical the point was made again:

> Criticism is always with us, yet it has achieved no consistent method by which the true artist can be distinguished from the false with any reliability . . . no standard of taste has yet proved sufficiently comprehensive to essay correctly the merit of a new poet and relegate him, as the critics still futilely attempt to do, to a fitting rank and station among his peers.

These comments, by Arthur K. Sabin, now seem dated; they seem so not because they no longer apply but because they prescribe, with such freshness, the attempt. Nowadays there is no lack of emphatic assertions of literary standards, and there are enough 'consistent methods' and 'comprehensive standards of taste' to require critical study themselves.

But the criticism of the early years of the century was not, by and large, disposed to treat such problems, or to talk of scientific approaches to criticism; it was all a matter of taste. Some had it and some didn't; this was the implication. It was towards the end of the Great War that signs of development appeared. *The Egoist* began to print criticism and, more importantly at the time, discussion of criticism by Eliot and Pound; *The Athenaeum*, in a final burst of glory under the editorship of John Middleton Murry, presented its readers with a succession of book reviews and articles on literature by many of the best minds of the time. With the foundation of reviews like *The Criterion* and *The Calendar of Modern Letters*, which not only criticized but submitted to searching examination the positions from which critical standpoints were made, the critical revival was estab-

lished, and by 1932 it was possible for a review, *Scrutiny*, to appear whose main concern was the revaluation of the whole body of English literature from a central carefully presented critical viewpoint, which had developed under the stimulus of the critical gains of Eliot, Pound, Murry, Richards and the group of *Calendar* critics.

By 1920, the old literary establishment had been more or less ousted by the younger generation that had been coming into prominence since about 1910. Lawrence, Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, Norman Douglas, Wyndham Lewis, Middleton Murry and many others had established themselves over this period; and in 1924 there appeared in print T. E. Hulme's posthumous volume of essays. *Speculations*, which consolidated many ideas which had been active among writers over the previous two decades. In *The Criterion* (XVI, 65) for July 1937, T. S. Eliot remarked, in one of his 'Commentaries':

> The period which may be said to have begun about 1910 had its own critical requirements which were not those of a general assessment of the literatures of the past. What was needed was a critical activity to revise creative writing, to introduce new material and new technique from other countries and other times. The accomplishment of the Imagist movement in verse seems to me, in retrospect, to have been critical rather than creative; and as criticism, very important.

But, he adds, the period after the war seems to him one of less lively interest in the problems of creative writing, one more concerned with esthetics in general, and with psychology. 'For this period, the psychological subtleties of Mr I. A. Richards, and the more general and increasingly political aesthetics of Mr Read seem to provide what is desired.'

The catch-word of the post-war period was Hulme's word, 'classical', with its distrust of the metaphysical attitude and the infinite view. *The Criterion*, *The Calendar of Modern Letters* and *Scrutiny* were all classical in tone, opposed to the Romanticism of Murry's *The Adelphi* and the Dionysianism of Jack Lindsay's *London Aphrodite*. For *The Calendar*, the word 'classicism' had a specific context—'the characteristics of a healthy criticism' wrote Bertram Higgins 'are invariably "classic", tending towards an ever greater rigidity of principle, organizations more explicit, and the canalization of the wide,

shallow stream of taste'. But it was not classicism as the *Criterion* meant it; the same critic complained that in Eliot's review 'neo-classicism' was being used as a repressive instrument of literary criticism, in which religious and ethical preoccupations held too much place. Criticism in *The Calendar* was more carefully poised, but geared always toward some general critical agreement, some implied consent. This was a period concerned to clarify and define; a 'period of consolidation' after the establishment of the modern movement at the beginning of the century. Its spirit *was* distinctively modern. But it was a period concerned to establish a tradition and to develop a sound relationship with other arts and sciences; it was concerned too with the development of what Eliot called 'the European mind'—a whole, wide-ranging cultural responsibility. And this extension of interests paved the way for the political interests of the writers of the 1930s.

II

*The Calendar of Modern Letters* first appeared in March 1925 as a monthly literary review. Its editor was Edgell Rickword; and Douglas Garman, and later Bertram Higgins, was its assistant editor. It published twelve numbers in monthly form and then, with the issue for April 1926, it became a quarterly, increasing its price by one shilling to half a crown. In this form it continued until it ended its short life with volume four, number two, dated July 1927. During that short period of existence, it published some of the best criticism to appear in any literary review since the decline of the great politico-literary reviews of the nineteenth century. Moreover, it was criticism informed by theory; on the strength of a very small number of articles, clearer formulation of critical ideas was made available to that small body of readers which the review reached (its circulation, according to Edgell Rickword, began at 7–8,000 and dropped over the first year to 2–3,000; it then became a quarterly and its circulation dropped to 1,000).

The circumstances of its foundation, as Edgell Rickword recollected them for me, were these: the paper was the project of a loosely-knit group of young writers feeling their way in London literary journalism. Two of them, Rickword and

Bertram Higgins, who met as undergraduates at Oxford soon after the War, had been publishing verse and criticism in various journals for some years. They were joined in 1923 or 4 by Douglas Garman, a slightly younger friend just down from Cambridge. These three had a good deal in common, including, which was most relevant at this point, a profound dissatisfaction with the current literary scene—particularly so, as Eliot's *Criterion* was, they thought, failing to achieve the critical precision they had expected of it under an editor of such acute critical power. After many discussions, they sketched out an alternative platform for a literary journal.

There the matter might have remained had not a common friend, Ernest Wishart, keenly interested in contemporary literature, undertaken to provide the necessary financial backing.

It began with rigorous standards and, even when at the end of its life it seemed it might continue by foregoing some of its strictness, it preferred to fail with its intentions uncompromised. In its last number a statement, entitled 'Valediction Forbidding Mourning', suggests what those intentions were:

> The most natural step for a review to take, if it wishes to survive, is to adopt a 'political' attitude (one, that is, which implies a tendency to judge by expediency) and, though we realize that such an attitude may be almost essential to the achievement of a sound economic status, we cannot consider it as less than an abuse of function. For, in taking such a step, the freedom to exercise an independent judgement on contemporary work will be lost—not in so gross a sense as by commercial obligation, but by the more subtle and more obnoxious distortions required for the continued support of one's own platform. One can have little respect for the periodical which flaunts a pretension to philosophical righteousness and yet makes as many blunders with regard to the actual works of poetry or literature before it as the most unenlightened of its Georgian predecessors.

The value of a review, the article went on, must be judged by its attitude to the living literature of the time, which includes such works of the past as can be absorbed into the contemporary sensibility. A magazine with such standards should be able to draw, in its more regular contributors, on a homogeneity of view—but a vital homogeneity and not 'the placid acceptance of

a body of dogma or prejudices of one superior mind (legitimate only to itself) by some unindividualized members of the *intelligentzia'*. The consensus of *The Calendar* was vital enough, and it seems to have been contemporary also, since many of the opinions expressed passed into critical lore. On the other hand, however, this final editorial did admit a suspicion that its own synthesis had not been in every respect adequate, and it explained that it was partly because of this suspicion that the review was ceasing to function:

> There comes a moment in the creation of a work of art when a new conception interposes itself and makes further revision impossible. A review has quite different functions from a work of art but the parallel may serve to explain the unwillingness of those most closely associated with *The Calendar* to continue it in its present form. . . .

What this new conception was was never made clear, though the appearance of one of the editors in the *The Left Review* in due course may be something of an explanation.

That *The Calendar* was assertive enough about 'standards of criticism' may be gathered from this editorial tone, and some of its aims as a periodical may be clarified by a review it gave to *The New Criterion*—as *The Criterion* was at this period called —in February 1926, in which the question of an organizing principle for a magazine is debated—'not even the bulkiest review can be boundlessly eclectic, and as soon as the element of choice is introduced the question of a principle or a programme becomes paramount'. The reviewer remarks of *The Criterion* that Mr Eliot's 'colours' are 'very faintly painted in' and identifies his position with the intellectualist reaction against 'the intuitionalist debauch'. Bertram Higgins later elaborated the point by remarking that Eliot's 'neo-classicism' was the literary version of a reactionary Latin philosophy, neo-Thomism, which was adapted into a repressive instrument of criticism, whose main aspects were a 'verbal sobriety which disguised its positivism, its calm and socialized demeanour in the midst of the revolutionary concepts by which we are surrounded, and its genuine but exaggerated docility to the world of learning'. *The Calendar* went in for fresher and more pragmatic style, advancing its standards warily and in action. It announced in its first issue:

> We lay down no programme as to *The Calendar's* performance, nor prophecy as to its character, since these things cannot interest our readers till they have a tangible existence, and then we shall be ready to join our own criticism with theirs. A conviction of the value of spontaneous growth (or growth which seems spontaneous to the watching mind) and of unpoliced expression. . . .

It aimed to be of value to those readers who 'wish to keep in touch with the literature which reflects the spirit of the present day', and it promised a series of critical articles entitled 'Scrutinies' which would 'examine the reputations of certain writers who are the object of somewhat indiscriminate admiration'.

The cageyness about standards didn't mean that the paper could claim none, as was evident when the series of 'Scrutinies' began. The series (which is reprinted with revision in the first of two volumes of *Scrutinies: Critical Essays* (edited by Edgell Rickword) (London, 1928) is perhaps the main achievement of the review; it demonstrated, by the use of close critical analysis and with a higher skill in exegesis than had been commonly found up to now in any critical paper, positive literary deficiencies in works that had up to the time been held in high esteem. The articles were the first full scale attempt for many years to achieve by close and exacting criticism a scrupulous and considered evaluation of a work of art. The series gave *Scrutiny* its name and something of its method, and may be compared with the series in *Scrutiny* called 'Revaluations', which went on to examine reputations even more soundly established, and to address itself to the task of reconsidering the whole tradition of English literature. *The Calendar* was concerned primarily with the main figures of twentieth-century literature as they appeared at that time. With the rise of Eliot, Pound and the survivors of the Imagist movement, a number of poets and novelists of the earliest part of the century had been challenged. But unlike many magazines intent upon establishing a new era, it did not dismiss easily, working through its argument by close and exacting analysis. Thus the first of the series, an examination by Edgell Rickword of Sir James Barrie, noted 'an essential dramatic deficiency in [Barrie's] failure to separate his figures from his own emotional attitude towards them, a failure to

complete the objectification of feeling which is the condition of art', an observation we would take for granted today but which was far from being familiar in 1925. Rickword's final conclusions elaborate his standard:

> At the end of the play, comedy or tragedy, if it is what we call successful, the level of desirable emotion has been heightened in those characters with whom the writer has decided that we shall identify our sympathies; others are inevitably the poorer. Barrie's peculiar trick, and that which prevents one from receiving any genuine stimulation from his plays, is a confusion of emotional perspective: by this means, emotions or loss and deprivation are made equivalent in value to those of fruition. . . .

This is practical criticism, concerned with technicalities, and concerned with solving artistic problems about design of works of art and the relations of parts to wholes. However, there is also a moral note struck, a willingness to challenge an artist's whole view of life, as when Douglas Garman, in the second of the series, speaks, in discussing Walter de la Mare, of 'the falsity of the values which he supports'. In the third, Bertram Higgins, considering the poetry of John Masefield, hits a note rather like Rickwords', analysing

> the emotional intention which, in all imperfect poetry, perceptibly accompanies the aesthetic achievement. The careless reader is only too likely to mistake the first for the second, and in Masefield this game of substitution assumes the proportions of downright bluff. . . .

C. H. Rickword, in the fifth of the series, pointed out that Bernard Shaw was rather an evangelist than a serious writer; and he pointed out that the artistic consequence of his belief in, and use of, the Life Force was that his plays 'far from attempting a reconciliation of life in the classical manner, are purely romantic flights from reality'. These analyses represent the standpoint of the review; they involve a clear idea of the full dramatic organization of the play, or the artistic organization of the novel, and an awareness of the traits which emasculate the general effect, in terms of failures to answer structural problems thrown up by a work of this kind. The method might be described as Aristotelian, since it presupposes that each work throws up its own rules and probabilities as it advances, and that

offences against these expectations are failures in working. There is also the moral observation, always rooted closely in the literary judgement; when Douglas Garman picks out, in the work of Walter de la Mare, certain lines that 'approximate to the effect he intends but are almost nonsense', he shows the technique at its best—precise and exacting with an awareness of the effect of the whole work on its parts and the effect of the writer's emotional attitude toward his material.

Outside this series *The Calendar* printed a number of articles of high critical importance. There were studies of Poe, James Joyce and—tackling another field ready for criticism, criticism itself—Kenneth Burke. Robert Graves and Laura Riding wrote on anthologies. In an important article, 'The Re-Creation of Poetry' (*Calendar* I, 3, May 1925), Edgell Rickword addressed the problem of analysing the sources of the poetic emotion, observing that 'a poem must, at some point or other, release, enable to flow back to the level of active life, the emotions caught up from life and pent in the aesthetic reservoir', a view that raises evident critical consequences. Perhaps, from the historical point of view, an even more important article was John Crowe Ransom's essay, 'Thoughts on Poetic Discontent' (*Calendar* I, 6, August 1925), one of the earliest salvoes of the American 'new criticism'. Ransom addressed himself to considering irony as a form of poetic control—'Irony may be regarded as the ultimate mode of great minds—it presupposes the others.' Another important issue, the relation of a writer to his society, was aired profoundly by Edwin Muir in an essay on 'The Zeit-Geist' (*Calendar* II, 8, October 1925); Muir argued that the power most solidly obnoxious to the artist is not the public but the intelligentsia. It is the calibre of his resistance to the values and standards presented there that give an artist's work its quality, and the *zeitgeist* nowadays not only encourages that resistance but also 'gives him a new inspiration, once the resistance has been vitally pierced'. Wyndham Lewis was another important contributor, appearing several times; of particular interest is his argument in 'The Dithyrambic Spectator' (*Calendar* I, 2, April 1925 and *Calendar* I, 3, May 1925) where he puts the case (which reappears in his *The Diabolical Principle* (1931)) that the Arts today exist where the need for them is absent, and they are perpetuated for their own sake. D. H.

Lawrence appeared several times, contributing poems, reviews and the essay 'Morality and the Novel'. Both Lawrence and Lewis were solicited for contributions because of the intrinsic value of their work, not because they supported the 'programme' of the review. The editors had also sought a contribution from James Joyce, but when it arrived (an extract from 'Anna Livia Plurabelle') were frustrated by the quite excessive (even for those days) prudery of their printers, and had to retreat discomfited.*

In this way, and gradually, the review built up a body of opinion, centred around Edgell Rickword, his cousin C. H. Rickword, Bertram Higgins and Douglas Garman, but widening out to include and support Lewis, Lawrence and Edwin Muir, which had a coherent sense to it, a conviction about literature as a field worthy of close exegetical study and yet open to larger issues about its social background and its moral content. Perhaps the best example of the spirit, and the practical success, of the review's thinking and its effect upon those who took the opportunity of the running debate it offered is to be found in two discussions by C. H. Rickword of the criticism of fiction. The occasion of the first discussion was Elizabeth Drew's book, *The Modern Novel*, which C. H. Rickword reviewed (*Calendar* III, 2, July 1926) and which gave him the chance to observe that the critical terminology we had been applying to novels was unreal and dangerous. He gave as an example the singling out of 'character' as a part of the novel:

> . . . whereas rhythm [in poetry] corresponds to an actual excitement in the reader's mind that can be traced to its source in the means employed, character corresponds to nothing so definite. Rhythm is a property of words, character a product that needs analysis before a satisfactory account of its effect can be given in terms of its constituents, and a product, moreover, that invites extra-literary scrutiny. Such scrutiny is fatal to criticism, for, though it may be that the critic's ultimate concern is with the conception of life (the 'values') of which the novel is a vehicle, yet he is only so concerned in so far as that conception is made active through art.

Critics tend moreover to regard character 'as a portrait of an imagined human being' and to prefer the writer who provides the deeper illusion. But, though Raskolnikov is 'deeper' than

Tom Jones, in that more of his interior is directly exposed, he is a figure of different and not great significance. Character is merely the term by which the reader alludes to 'the pseudo-objective image he composes of his responses to the author's verbal arrangements'; and once this image has been composed it can be criticized from many angles and regarded for its political, social or religious significance, as though it possessed actual objectivity. This article is further developed in the next issue of *The Calendar*, when under the title of 'A Note on Fiction' (*Calendar* III, 3, October 1926), C. H. Rickword postulates a more 'organic' approach to fiction. The form of a novel only exists as a balance of response on the part of the reader. 'Only as precipitates from the memory are plot or character tenable; yet only in solution have either any emotional valency.' Such effects are technical devices, effects produced by the novelist; the techniques of the novel are just as symphonic as the technique of the drama and depend upon the dynamic devices of articulation and control of narrative tempo. Thus plot and character exist in solution. Modern opinion has inclined to the view, says Rickword, that plot be determined by, or arise out of, character. It is, he declares, evident however that character arises out of narrative. Further, novels in which character does not seem to dominate give aesthetic satisfaction and one has to look for this by noting a common quality in all great works of literature:

> It is a unity among the events, a progressive rhythm that includes and reconciles each separate rhythm. As manifested in the novel, it resolves, when analysed, chiefly into character and plot in a secondary, schematic sense—qualities that are purely fictitious. Neither is an active element in the whole work in the way that melody and harmony are elements in a piece of music. Perhaps it would be less ambiguous to designate this basic, poetic quality by some such term as rhythm or development; on the other hand, plot or story do indicate its nature—that it is primarily a sequence of events developing in accordance with an inner necessity.

The recognition of this inner necessity (which Rickword uses much as Aristotle uses the notion of plot or myth) constitutes the recognition of value—and it springs ultimately from the

writer's conception of life and the adequacy of his vehicle in presenting that conception.

The article is clearly a seminal one not only for *The Calendar* but for modern criticism generally, both in England and the United States, where the paper circulated. Many modern attitudes toward the criticism of fiction are concentrated in it. There is the assumption that novels are 'wholes', unified conceptions; that they are not just life rendered on the page but verbal constructs with their own laws and their own ways of producing effects on the reader; and that the quality of the author's conception of life plays a substantial part in his invention. While, clearly, there *are* novels invented in terms of that conception of 'plot' and 'character' that Rickword challenges, our reading is richer if we acknowledge that inventions in the novel do usually work to a pattern like the one Rickword describes.

*The Calendar's* record in creative work is also impressive, though, for obvious reasons, it could not always uphold the standards set by the criticism. It felt a responsibility to do justice to writers of promise who deserved the encouragement of publication and it sought to be of value to those readers who wished to keep in touch 'with literature which reflects the spirit of the present age'. The review had in fact no reason to be modest on this account; the standard was very high indeed. The opening numbers serialized D. H. Lawrence's story 'The Princess', and there were stories from Pirandello, A. E. Coppard, Liam O'Flaherty, Leonid Leonov, William Gerhardi, Stephen Hudson, Douglas Garman and others. Chekov's comedy *The Wood Demon* was serialized. The poetry came from Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon. Edgell Rickword, Edmund Blunden, Bertram Higgins and others. There were, too, critical essays which lay rather outside the general theory of the review and are yet of real importance—such essays as E. M. Forster's on 'Anonymity', Samuel Hoare's on Rimbaud and Edwin Muir's on *Ulysses*. One aspect of the review deserves particular attention—it was among the earliest papers to draw attention to the younger American poets and critics who were coming into prominence at this time. Thus there is John Crowe Ransom's essay on irony, and Gorham B. Munson's study of the criticism of Kenneth Burke. In addition the work of three important

young American poets—John Crowe Ransom, Hart Crane and Allen Tate—appeared in its pages.

It is strange, considering its record and its historical importance, that *The Calendar* has not been more widely remembered and, one might add, imitated. There is still room for a review of its sort—eclectic yet with a high critical sophistication and exigence—at the present time. Its blood brothers are in fact American reviews like *The Kenyon Review*; and it is interesting to note that the review did have a strong impact in America, and is still, it seems, better remembered there. Nonetheless, there have always been a few critics and writers who remembered the paper with gratitude. To some minds the paper was over-austere; thus H. P. Collins, reviewing the second volume of *Scrutinies*, spoke of a group of critics, mostly unknown, 'who possess a detachment and capacity for subtle differentiation and analysis which would have been incomprehensible a dozen years ago' together with 'a new degree of sophistication more formidable than the old 'superiority' of the ultra-artistic, a sophistication rather bloodless and probably deplorable, but arising from a mature, if not a deep, culture' (*Criterion* X, 41, July 1931). He was worried by its intellectualism—'at once the apotheosis of Bloomsbury and the dissolvent of Bloomsbury'—and the fact that its criticism was not creative, not concerned even with the society in which art grows. Today we are not so apt to find intellectuality so worrying, and a fresh look at *The Calendar* would show it to be surprisingly modern and enduring.

* See Sylvia Beach, Shakespeare and Company. (Faber, 1960)

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